

The water footprint of bioenergy

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All energy scenarios show a shift toward an increased percentage of renewable energy sources, including biomass. This study gives an overview of water footprints (WFs) of bioenergy from 12 crops that currently contribute the most to global agricultural production: barley, cassava, maize, potato, rapeseed, rice, rye, sorghum, soybean, sugar beet, sugar cane, and wheat. In addition, this study includes jatropha, a suitable energy crop. Since climate and production circumstances differ among regions, calculations have been performed by country. The WF of bioelectricity is smaller than that of biofuels because it is more efficient to use total biomass (e.g., for electricity or heat) than a fraction of the crop (its sugar, starch, or oil content) for biofuel. The WF of bioethanol appears to be smaller than that of biodiesel. For electricity, sugar beet, maize, and sugar cane are the most favorable crops [50 m³/gigajoule (GJ)]. Rapeseed and jatropha, typical energy crops, are disadvantageous (400 m³/GJ). For ethanol, sugar beet, and potato (60 and 100 m³/GJ) are the most advantageous, followed by sugar cane (110 m³/GJ); sorghum (400 m³/GJ) is the most unfavorable. For biodiesel, soybean and rapeseed show to be the most favorable WF (400 m³/GJ); jatropha has an adverse WF (600 m³/GJ). When expressed per L, the WF ranges from 1,400 to 20,000 L of water per L of biofuel. If a shift toward a greater contribution of bioenergy to energy supply takes place, the results of this study can be used to select the crops and countries that produce bioenergy in the most water-efficient way.

sustainability | climate change | energy | biomass | natural resource use

In the coming decades humanity will face important challenges, not only to meet the basic human need for water (1, 2), but also to ensure that extraction of water from rivers, streams, lakes, and aquifers does not affect freshwater ecosystems performing ecological functions (3). With a world population of 9.2 billion by 2050, as projected by the United Nations (4), there are reasons for concern over whether the food and fiber needs of future generations can be met in regions with limited water resources (3, 5–8).

The scientific as well as the international political community often consider global change in relation to climate change. It is generally recognized that the emission of greenhouse gases is responsible for anthropogenic impacts on the climate system. To reduce emissions, a shift toward renewable energy, such as bioenergy, is heavily promoted. Other advantages of renewable energy are an increase in energy supply security, resource diversification, and the absence of depletion risks (9). The sources of bioenergy can be crops specifically grown for that purpose, natural vegetation, or organic wastes (10). Many of the crops used for bioenergy can also—alternatively, not at the same time—be used as food or feed. Biomass can be burnt to produce heat and electricity, but it can also be used for the production of bioethanol or biodiesel, which are biofuels that can displace fossil energy carriers in motor vehicles (11).

At present, the agricultural production of biomass for food and fiber requires ≈86% of worldwide freshwater use (12, 13). In many parts of the world, the use of water for agriculture competes with other uses, such as urban supply and industrial activities (14), although the aquatic environment shows signs of degradation and decline (1). An increase in demand for food in combination with a shift from fossil energy toward bioenergy puts additional pressure on freshwater resources. For the future,

scarcely any new land will be available so all production must come from the current natural resource base (15), requiring a process of sustainable intensification by increasing the efficiency of land and water use (16).

Globally, many countries explore options for replacing gasoline with biofuels (11). The European Union and the U.S. even have set targets for this replacement. When agriculture grows bioenergy crops, however, it needs additional water that then cannot be used for food. Large-scale cultivation of biomass for fossil fuel substitution influences future water demand (17). An important question is whether we should apply our freshwater resources to the production of bioenergy or to food crops. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that in 2007 alone, before the food price crisis struck, 75 million more people were pushed into undernourishment as a result of higher prices, bringing the total number of hungry people in the world to 923 million (18). Moreover, the FAO reports that biofuels increase food insecurity (19). The World Bank recognizes biofuel production as a major factor in driving up food prices. It estimates that 75% of the increase in food prices in the period from 2002–2008 was due to biofuels (20). The current financial crisis may diminish purchasing power and increase the risk of a drop in food intake. As a result, more people are likely to fall below the hunger threshold. Households may make decisions to have fewer meals or eat cheaper foods of lower nutritional value, decisions that can have particularly severe consequences for infants and children (21).

The replacement of fossil energy with bioenergy generates the need for detailed information on water requirements for this new energy source. A concept for the calculation of water needs for consumer products is the water footprint (WF) (12, 13, 22), defined as the total annual volume of fresh water used to produce goods and services for consumption.

The objective of this study is to give a global overview of the WF per unit of bioenergy [m³/gigajoule (GJ)], including heat, electricity, bioethanol, and biodiesel. This study covers the 12 main crops that together form 80% of global crop production. In addition, this study includes jatropha, a plant species often mentioned in the context of bioenergy. Research questions are: (i) what are the WFs (m³/GJ) for heat and electricity derived from the combustion of biomass per crop per country and (ii) what are the WFs (m³/GJ) for transport fuels (bioethanol and biodiesel) per crop per country. The study excludes organic wastes, such as manure or crop residues, biogas, and energy from algae. This study builds upon 2 earlier studies: one that estimated the WFs of a large variety of food and fiber products (12, 13), and one that estimated the WF of heat from biomass (23). This study

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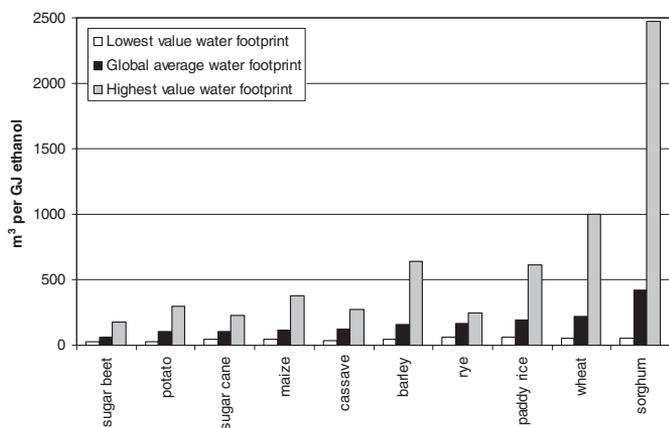


Fig. 1. Lowest value, highest value, and weighted-average global value of the WF for energy for 10 crops providing ethanol.

times 59% of the WF of electricity, as shown in Table 1, based on the energy efficiency assumed in this study (see *Methods*).

The WF of First-Generation Biofuels. Table S3 shows energy provided by ethanol [higher heating value (HHV) ethanol in megajoule/kg fresh weight of the crop] from 2 sugar and 8 starch crops included in this study. There are 3 groups: sugar crops and 1 starch crop with relatively low values for energy provided by ethanol (sugar beet, sugar cane, and potato), starch crops with relatively large values for energy provided by ethanol (sorghum, maize, wheat, barley, paddy rice, and rye), and 1 crop in between (cassava). These variations are caused by differences in the water content of the crops, where a large water content relates to relatively low energy values from ethanol. Table S3 also shows the energy provided by oil from the 3 oil crops included in this study. The HHV of oil from soybean is the lowest, about half the value of rapeseed or jatropha.

The WF of Bioethanol: Biofuel Energy Production per Crop Unit. Fig. 1 shows the lowest value, the highest value, and the weighted-average global value of the WF for energy of 10 crops providing ethanol, showing the enormous variation in the total WF among crops. This is especially true for sorghum, mainly caused by unfavorable conditions in Niger and highly efficient production in Egypt.

Fig. 2 gives weighted global average green and blue WFs for

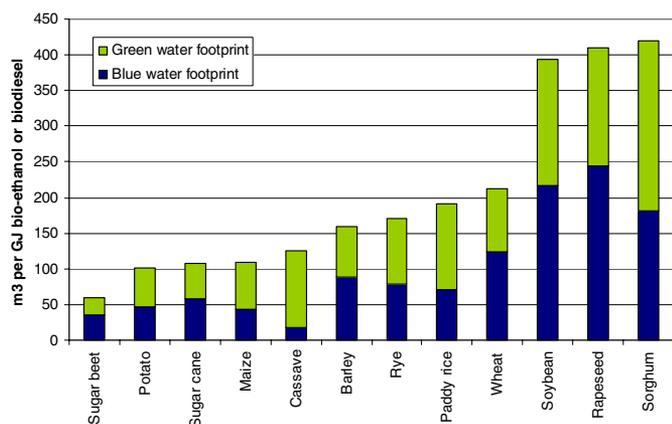


Fig. 2. The weighted global average WF for 10 crops providing ethanol and for 2 crops providing oil for biodiesel.

10 crops providing ethanol. It shows that there are large differences among crops.

Currently, sugar beet is the most favorable crop and sorghum the most disadvantageous, with a difference of a factor of 7 in terms of the size of the WF. When data for the 2 main ethanol producing countries, Brazil and the U.S., are compared, Brazilian ethanol from sugar cane is more efficient than maize (99 against 140 m³/GJ ethanol); however, in the U.S., maize is more attractive than sugar cane (78 against 104 m³/GJ ethanol). Fig. 2 also shows the distinction between green and blue water. As a global average, the blue WF of cassava is smallest. Other efficient crops are sugar beet, potato, maize, and sugar cane. In terms of blue water, sorghum is unfavorable.

Table 2 shows the total weighted global average WF for 10 crops providing ethanol, as well as their blue and green WF. Table 2 also shows the amount of water needed for a specific crop to produce 1 L of ethanol.

On average, to produce 1 L of ethanol from sugar beet takes ≈1,400 L of water, production from potato takes 2,400 L, production from sugar cane takes 2,500 L, and production from maize takes 2,600 L. Sorghum is the most inefficient crop, needing 9,800 L of water for 1 L of ethanol. Irrigation is least for cassava, at 400 L of blue water for 1 L of ethanol, followed by 800 L for sugar beet and 1,000 L for maize. Sorghum is the crop showing the largest blue WF, with 4,250 L per L of ethanol. As can be seen from a comparison of Tables 1 and 2, sugar beet is most efficient in terms of both ethanol and electricity. The other crops are in different order regarding the efficiency at which electricity and ethanol are produced. In general, the production of ethanol from only part of the crop is less water efficient than the production of electricity from total biomass.

The WF of Biodiesel. The WF of biodiesel derived from soybean, rapeseed, and jatropha shows differences among the main producing countries. For rapeseed, Western Europe has the smallest WFs and Asia has the largest (especially in India, where rapeseed has a large, blue WF). For soybean, Italy, Paraguay, and Argentina have the smallest WFs and India has the largest. Biodiesel from jatropha is produced in the most water-efficient way in Brazil and inefficiently in India. Table 2 shows the total weighted global average WF for biodiesel from soybean and rapeseed, and the average WF for biodiesel from jatropha, as well as their blue and green WF. Table 2 also shows the amount of water needed to produce 1 L of biodiesel; on average, it takes ≈14,000 L of water for soybean or rapeseed, and 20,000 L for jatropha.

The WF of Next-Generation Biofuels. For next-generation biofuels, total biomass of a crop can be used. When we optimistically assume that their production will be as efficient as the production of electricity from biomass (in terms of GJ/ton), the results shown in Table 1 form a lower limit for the WF of these next-generation biofuels. Another factor that has to be taken into account is the water use of biomass processing, fermentation, and distillation of these next-generation biofuels. On the other hand, agricultural water use is much larger than the processing water use. In the *SI Methods*, it is argued that water is predominantly used during the first link of the production chain—agriculture. This study, therefore, only took water requirements in agriculture into account and ignored water use in the industrial links of the production chain.

Discussion

Assumptions. Similar to earlier studies (12, 13, 27), the calculations have been based on the assumption that crop water use is equal to crop water requirements. When actual water availability is lower and water stress occurs, this study overestimates the crop water use. With respect to agricultural yields, we have taken

Table 2. Total weighted-global average WF for 10 crops providing ethanol and 3 crops providing biodiesel (m³/GJ), as well as their blue and green WF

Crop	Total WF	Blue WF	Green WF	Total water	Blue water	Green water
Ethanol		m ³ per GJ ethanol			L of water per L of ethanol	
Sugar beet	59	35	24	1,388	822	566
Potato	103	46	56	2,399	1,078	1,321
Sugar cane	108	58	49	2,516	1,364	1,152
Maize	110	43	67	2,570	1,013	1,557
Cassava	125	18	107	2,926	420	2,506
Barley	159	89	70	3,727	2,083	1,644
Rye	171	79	92	3,990	1,846	2,143
Paddy rice	191	70	121	4,476	1,641	2,835
Wheat	211	123	89	4,946	2,873	2,073
Sorghum	419	182	238	9,812	4,254	5,558
Biodiesel		m ³ per GJ biodiesel			L of water per L of biodiesel	
Soybean	394	217	177	13,676	7,521	6,155
Rapeseed	409	245	165	14,201	8,487	5,714
Jatropha*	574	335	239	19,924	11,636	8,288

The table also shows the amount of water needed for a specific crop to produce 1 L of ethanol or 1 L of biodiesel.

*Average figures for 5 countries (India, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Brazil, and Guatemala).

actual yields, which in many cases can be increased in the future without increasing water use per unit of product. This future yield increase means that in some cases WFs per unit of energy can be significantly lowered. For the efficiency of obtaining electricity or biofuels from biomass, we have made optimistic assumptions by taking theoretical maximum values or values that refer to the best available technology. These assumptions mean that the resulting WF figures are conservative.

Sensitivities. The results of this study are based on rough estimates of freshwater requirements in crop production and on theoretical maximum conversion efficiencies in the production of bioelectricity and biofuels. For the assessment of the WF of bioenergy, the study integrated data from several sources, each of which adds a degree of uncertainty. For example, the calculations using the FAO model CROPWAT (28) required input of meteorological data that are averages over several years rather than data for a specific year. The data presented thus do not reflect annual variations. Estimated crop water requirements are sensitive to the input of climatic data and assumptions concerning the start of the growing season. In the most extreme cases, this study found crop water requirements that were a factor of 2 different from earlier studies (12, 13, 27), whereas at other times the results were similar. The aspects mentioned above imply that results presented here are indicative. However, the differences in calculated WFs are so great that general conclusions with respect to the WF of bioethanol vs. the WF of biodiesel can be drawn and that conclusions also can be drawn about the relative WFs of different crops.

Gross vs. Net Production of Bioenergy. There is a distinction between gross and net production of bioenergy (29, 30). In assessing the WF of heat, electricity, and fuels from biomass, we looked at the WF of the gross energy output from crops. We did not study energy inputs in the production chain, such as energy requirements in the agricultural system (e.g., energy use for the production of fertilizers and pesticides) or energy use during the industrial production of the biofuel. Neglecting energy inputs means that this study underestimates the WF of bioenergy, most particularly so in cases where agricultural systems have a relatively large energy input. For example, if energy input equals 50% of the energy output—something common in bioenergy production systems (30)—the WF of the net bioenergy production would be twice the WF of the gross energy production.

Conclusions

The WF of bioenergy is large when compared to other forms of energy. In general, it is more efficient to use total biomass, including stems and leaves, to generate electricity than to produce a biofuel. For most crops, the WF of bioelectricity is about a factor of 2 smaller than the WF of bioethanol or biodiesel. This difference is caused by the crop fraction that can be used. For electricity, total biomass can be used; for bioethanol or biodiesel, only the starch or oil fraction of the yield can be used. In general, the WF of bioethanol is smaller than that of biodiesel. The WF of bioenergy shows large variation, depending on 3 factors: (i) the crop used, (ii) the climate at the location of production, and (iii) the agricultural practice:

- i. For electricity generation, sugar beet, maize, and sugar cane with WFs of ≈ 50 m³/GJ are the most favorable crops, followed by barley, rye, and rice with WFs of ≈ 70 – 80 m³/GJ. Rapeseed and jatropha, typical energy crops showing WFs of ≈ 400 m³/GJ, are the least water-efficient. For the production of ethanol, 2 crops grown in a temperate climate (sugar beet and potato) with WFs of ≈ 60 and 100 m³/GJ, respectively, are most efficient, followed by a crop typical for a warm climate, sugar cane, showing a WF just below 110 m³/GJ. Values for maize and cassava are larger than for sugar beet, sugar cane, and potato at 110 and 125 m³/GJ, respectively. With a WF of >400 m³/GJ, sorghum is by far the most disadvantageous crop. For biodiesel production, soybean and rapeseed, crops mainly grown for food, show the best WF at ≈ 400 m³/GJ; jatropha has the least favorable WF of ≈ 600 m³/GJ.
- ii. Results show large differences in crop water requirements among countries, caused by differences in climate. The crop water requirement of sugar beet grown in Iran, for example, is twice the weighted global average value.
- iii. Agricultural practice determines yields and thus differences among WFs of crops, even where there is a similar climate. If yield levels are relatively low, WFs are high and vice versa. For example, in Kazakhstan yields of barley, potato, and wheat are relatively low. In combination with unfavorable climatic factors this results in high values for the WFs. Conditions in Denmark are favorable for wheat resulting in relatively low crop water requirements.

Theoretically, all crops can be used for energy, including crops such as rice and rye that are currently mainly used for food. Water use for a specific crop does not depend on whether the

crop is for energy or for food. Some food crops, including rice, are more water-efficient in producing a unit of ethanol, biodiesel, or electricity than some typical energy crops, such as rapeseed or jatropha. The ethical discussion on whether food crops can be used for energy should be extended to a discussion on whether we should use our limited water resource base for food or for energy.

The scientific and the international political communities promote a shift toward renewable energy sources, such as biomass, to limit the emission of greenhouse gases. This study has shown that biomass production goes hand in hand with large water requirements. There are already reasons for profound concern in several regions and countries with limited water resources about whether the food and fiber needs of future generations can be met. If a shift toward a larger contribution from bioenergy to total energy supply takes place, results of this study can be used to select the crops and countries that (under current production circumstances) produce bioenergy in the most water-efficient way.

Methods

The calculation of the WF of bioenergy is done in several steps including the calculation of (i) the WF of crops, (ii) energy yields of bioethanol, biodiesel, heat, and electricity per crop, and (iii) the WF of heat, electricity, and first-generation and next-generation biofuels. The method is presented in detail in the *SI Methods*.

Calculation of the WF of Crops. For the assessment of the WF of bioenergy, the study follows the method of Hoekstra and Chapagain (13) to arrive at estimates of the WF of crops. WF calculations were made by adding up daily crop evapotranspiration (mm/day) using the model CROPWAT 4.3 (28) over growing periods distinguishing between the green and the blue WF. These calcu-

lations provided information on the crop water requirements for the 12 crops shown in Table S1 and for jatropha. Calculations were performed for the main producing countries, deriving data from the FAO (3). In general, yields show variations over the years. The study, therefore, calculated average yields over 5 production years (1997–2001) by using data from the FAO (31).

Calculation of the WF of Heat and Electricity from Biomass. For the calculation of the WF of heat from biomass, the study has followed the method of Gerbens-Leenes, et al. (23), which calculated the energy yield of a crop (GJ/ton) by combining data on the heat of combustion of plant components with information on composition, harvest index, and dry-mass fraction of a crop, as shown in Tables S4 and S5. The WF of heat from a crop (m^3/GJ) was calculated by dividing the WF of the total crop biomass, including stems and leaves, (m^3/ton) by the total heat content (GJ/ton). The WF of biomass electricity (m^3/GJ) was calculated by dividing the WF of the total crop biomass (m^3/ton) by the electricity output per crop unit (GJ/ton).

Calculation of the WF of First-Generation Biofuels. The WF of ethanol-energy from a crop (m^3/GJ) was calculated by dividing the WF of the crop yield (m^3/ton) by the ethanol-energy yield (GJ/ton). The WF of biodiesel-energy (m^3/GJ) was calculated in a similar way. Table S6 gives the HHVs of ethanol and biodiesel. For first-generation biofuels, this study fully allocated the WF of the crop to the biofuels derived, assuming that the value of the residues of production is much lower than the value of the biofuel.

Calculation of the WF of Next-Generation Biofuels. It is expected that wastes, including cellulose, will form an attractive source for the production of liquid, next-generation biofuels so that industry can use total biomass. For the WF of next-generation biofuels, this study assumes that the WF of next-generation biofuels will never be lower than the WF of the total crop biomass (m^3/ton) divided by the energy content (GJ/ton), where the latter is expressed in terms of its HHV.

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